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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000563

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: SECTARIAN NERVES ON EDGE AFTER SAMARRA SHRINE
EXPLOSION

Classified By: POL COUNS ROBERT S. FORD, FOR
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: There are many rumors of attacks on Sunni religious sites and anti-Sunni demonstrations in the wake of the February 22 bombing of the Shia holy mosque in Samarra, but there appears to be much less occurring on the ground. Sunni Arab Iraqi Islamic Party Deputy Secretary-General Ala Makki told PolOff February 22 that there have been "retaliatory" attacks on 29 Sunni Arab mosques in Baghdad and other cities. So far, we can confirm only three - one in Baghdad and two in Basrah. The party's headquarters in Basrah also was attacked. Evening television showed large Shia marches in several districts of Baghdad. Both Sunni and Shia groups condemned the attack on Samarra mosque. Prime Minister Ibrahim Al-Ja'afari announced a 3-day period of mourning and released government employees early from work, the first such early shutdown of the government in the past two years. National Security Advisor Al-Rubaie told Al-Arabiya television that Iraqi security forces have detained ten people linked to the Samarra explosion. Our sense is that while events here are not spiraling out of control, sectarian tensions have grown substantially in recent months and the reaction to the Samarra mosque attack is only the latest manifestation. END SUMMARY

OUTCRY IN BAGHDAD

12. (C) A member of the Baghdad Provincial Council claimed to PolOff during the early afternoon of February 22 that 26 Sunni mosques have been attacked, including the Al Mustapha mosque in Karkh, the Al Hamza mosque in Ghazaliya and the Firdos Square mosque. Sheikh Hassam Kajem Abd Allah, the Chairman of the Al Adhamyah District Council reported at 1545 hrs that the Al Farouk mosque on Palestine Street is burning and is still under attack, with worshippers trapped inside. Abd Allah also reported that a Sunni Sheikh was killed in the Istiqlal District, and that his body was dumped in front of the local police station. Nasaif Jassim, of the Sadr City District Advisory Council (DAC) General Information Center told PolOff that the Al-Sha'ab district Jaysh al-Mahdi is occupying four Sunni Arab mosques. The Iraqi Islamic Party issued a statement counting 29 Sunni Arab mosques it claimed had been assaulted. Hussain Mohammed Ali Al Tahan, Governor of the Baghdad Provincial Council asked PolOff to request U.S. forces impose martial law in order to help restore order.

13. (C) The Iraqi government announced that government employees were being released at 14:00 local, a couple hours early. (Comment: This is the first such instance we can recall during the past several years of such a step and shows the seriousness with which the government views the situation. End Comment.) The Embassy let its local staff leave early too. An Embassy FSN who lives near Sadr City reported to us on his way home that he was seeing armed Jaysh al-Mahdi convoys on the streets. There were some demonstrations in Baghdad, and markets closed early. Evening news broadcasts showed thousands demonstrating in the Baghdad districts of Kathimiya, Sadr City, Kerrada and Shuala.

BASRAH

14. (C) According to Ala Makki, Deputy Secretary General of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), the IIP branch office in Basrah was attacked by Jaysh al-Mahdi forces around 1300 hours. British contacts confirm that the Sadrist Jaysh al-Mahdi had surrounded the building and were reportedly detaining IIP staff. IIP leader Tariq al-Hashimi told Arab TV stations in the late afternoon that the Iraqi police had colluded in the attack on the Basrah headquarters and warned if its staff were harmed there would be retaliation. PolOff told an aide to al-Hashimi late afternoon that the IIP should avoid inflammatory rhetoric in the media and work with authorities and us to address specific

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incidents. Additionally, the Basrah Regional Reconstruction Operations Centre reported attacks on two Sunni mosques during the day - one attacked with RPGs and another vandalized by a mob.

DEMONSTRATIONS ELSEWHERE

15. (C) REO Hillah is reporting small demonstrations of 500-1000 people. Press reports indicate that afternoon demonstrations were scheduled for Karbala, Babil, and Diwaniya.

SUNNI AND SHIA JOINTLY CONDEMN ATTACK

16. (U) Both Sunni Arab and Shia groups condemned the attack on Samarra mosque. Prime Minister Jafari on the morning of February 22 told Iraqiya TV that the nation should avoid sectarian strife and hold to national unity. Minister of Interior Bayan Jabr announced that the government is forming an investigative committee composed of different sects to look into the crime, and called the incident an attack on all Iraqis. National Security Advisor Mowafaq Al-Rubaie told Al-Arabiya television that Iraqi security forces have detained ten people linked to the Samara explosion.

17. (U) According to media sources, the top Shia clerics in Najaf held a meeting this morning to discuss their community's response to the bombing. Pro-Shia al-Furat television reported that Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani later issued a fatwa forbidding attacks on Sunni mosques and religious "symbols". Al-Furat also reported that Ayatollah Mohammed Said al-Hakim, often viewed as the second most influential cleric in Najaf, bluntly told the government that since it could not protect Shia holy sites, it should let the public do it. Shia

political party SCIRI went into a special huddle meeting midday. Later, its leader, Abdulaziz Al-Hakim, issued a televised statement denouncing the attack. He blamed Ambassador Khalilzad's public remarks February 20 about avoiding sectarianism in the security ministries as encouraging Sunni Arab extremists to attack Shia. Muqtada Sadr was on Arabiya TV at 19:00 local blaming the Iraqi Government and Coalition Forces. He urged demonstrations be peaceful and urged his followers not to attack Sunni mosques. BBC Arabic quoted Sadr extremist Abd al-Hadi ad-Darraji saying that the Shia would not just condemn but respond vigorously to the attackers.

18. (U) The Iraqi Islamic Party denounced the attack, but it claimed that there appeared to be a hidden hand involved since the mosque had not been attacked before despite the security problems in Samarra. The usually outspoken Sunni Arab hard-liner Salih Mutlak issued a TV statement condemning the attack as well. All these speakers warned Iraqis against sliding into civil war. Consistent with the conspiratorial nature of Iraqi politics, an Allawi list contact told Poloffs that the Samarra explosion was a ploy by Jafari and the Sadrists to "unite" the Shia and prevent the Alliance from splitting and potentially depriving him of the premiership.

COMMENT

19. (C) Despite the many rumors, the number of confirmed attacks against Sunni sites in the wake of the Samarra bombing so far appears significantly lower. The number could easily rise in the days ahead; the Prime Minister worried about this with us midday February 22 (septel). Sistani's statement was especially important in terms of containing Shia emotions. Although retaliatory attacks so far appear relatively limited, sectarian tensions have grown substantially in recent months; the reaction to this mosque attack is only the latest manifestation. Public remarks from Shia leaders like al-Hakim about the public taking security into its own hands are worrisome as well. (Deputy President Abd al-Mahdi repeated this call with us privately - septel.) We can expect the Sadrists to

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take special advantage of this anger and fear, as they apparently did in Basrah. Most notably, in public and private our contacts are speaking with genuine concern about the possibility of civil war, something we did not hear much about two years ago.

KHALILZAD